Feminising politics, politicising feminism?

Women in post-conflict Northern Irish politics

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Abstract
2018 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the establishment of devolved governance in Northern Ireland. Yet, whilst devolution has largely been held to have positive effects in Scotland and Wales with regards to both women's descriptive and substantive representation, this impact has been less discernible in Northern Ireland. Of the four regions of the United Kingdom, politics in Northern Ireland is arguably the most unfeminised – women have routinely seen lower descriptive representation in the Northern Irish Assembly and policy-making in areas such as reproductive rights lies far behind the rest of the UK. The article explores why politics is so unfeminised in the post-conflict context in Northern Ireland, by looking at efforts to feminise formal politics (especially the various peace/inter-party agreements and attempts to include women in formal politics) and efforts to politicise feminist activism (the work of the women's sector to influence policy-making in the province). It then explores some of the academic explanations as to why the feminisation of politics remains so difficult in Northern Ireland.

Keywords : [~~TO GO HERE~~] women, gender, Northern Ireland, post-conflict, peace agreements

Introduction

2018 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement which cemented a formal peace in Northern Ireland. The Agreement is largely held up in international practice and academic literature as a success (Pierson, 2017, 2). Indeed, in terms of gender, it is a rarity amongst international peace agreements as it contains specific reference to the 'right of women to full and equal political participation'. Twenty years on, however, this positive language is found wanting. The Northern Irish Assembly sees the lowest level of women's representation in the national or devolved bodies across the United Kingdom~~, and, until 2016, also fell behind the Irish Daíl~~. Women's reproductive rights, childcare, domestic violence legislation and LGBT rights lag far behind the rest of the country. Furthermore, progress in these areas has been slow, and feminist activists have had limited success in encouraging political change or more progressive legislation.

This article provides an empirical overview of the status of women and/in politics twenty years after the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. The article explores why politics remains so unfeminised in the post-conflict context in Northern Ireland. It does so by providing an overview of the various peace and inter-party agreements that have been reached since 1998, the efforts made to include women in formal politics, and feminist activism and the work of the women's sector in the region. It considers both attempts to *feminise politics*, addressing the formal level of political representation and the ongoing peace/inter-party process, and also attempts to *politicise feminist activism*, and the links that activists have tried to forge between grassroots work/civil society and formal politics. Finally, it addresses the academic explanations that can be forwarded for the relatively poor standards of both descriptive and substantive representation of women that Northern Ireland has compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

Feminising politics

This section considers how, as Northern Ireland has moved from years of male-dominated conflict (an 'armed patriarchy'[1]) it has attempted, or neglected, to address women's representation in its post-conflict democracy. Here we address two main aspects of women's involvement in formal politics in Northern Ireland – their inclusion in the formal political bodies, most notably the devolved Northern Irish Assembly, and their acknowledgement within the successive peace/inter-party agreements.

Women's representation in formal politics

Formal politics in Northern Ireland have a poor track record on women's descriptive representation. Despite highly visible key women in contemporary Northern Irish politics (most notably former First Minister Arlene Foster, the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland Michelle O'Neill and Alliance Party leader Naomi Long), women's representation in political institutions in Northern Ireland has been substantially lower than the other formal political institutions in the United Kingdom. As Table 1 shows, from the advent of devolution in 1998 until the 2016 Assembly elections women's representation did not reach 20%. The 2016 elections saw the first real jump in women's descriptive presence in the Assembly, and women are currently represented at almost the same level as in the House of Commons (although, as of late 2018, the Assembly remains suspended, and those elected have yet to officially take their seats). Indeed, the Assembly now has higher descriptive representation of women than the Irish Daíl, which instigated quotas for female candidates from 2016.

However, when contrasted with the other devolved institutions Northern Ireland is found wanting. Edinburgh and Cardiff have largely seen much greater progress in terms of women's descriptive representation – especially Wales, which achieved 50% female Assembly Members in 2003. This change has been credited to the newness of these bodies, affording an opportunity

to re-think political practices and traditions that may be off-putting to women (Chaney, 2006; Mackay, 2006, 2010). The uptick in female representation has not, however, been seen in Northern Ireland. Progress has been far slower and continues to lag behind Scotland and Wales.

<Table 1 about here>

Academic considerations of the paucity of women's representation in Northern Ireland have largely considered it along the lines of a supply-demand equation (Tonge et al, 2014). Supply factors are clearly important, with Matthews (2014) reporting relatively few numbers of women coming forward to seek electoral office in his qualitative work across the five major parties. As he describes it, these 'regressive attitudes to women's formal political involvement' can largely be explained by 'the substantial socio-cultural factors which exist in the region' and the internalised 'traditional, conservative domestic role normatively assigned' to women in Northern Ireland (641). Yet, alongside a valid acknowledgement of the inhibiting gender conservatism of the region and the impact that this has on women's willingness to enter political life, it must equally be understood that political parties have been very lax in moving to address this issue. There are no formal measures adopted by any political party, although Sinn Féin have an informal quota of 30% women in winnable seats for Assembly elections. Recruitment procedures are largely decentralised across Northern Ireland, with little role for top down gender equality measures (Matthews, 2014). This is in sharp contrast to recent efforts in the Republic of Ireland, which has seen formal gender quotas introduced for all political parties (Buckley, 2013; Galligan, 2006, 2013). The British Labour party's use of All-Women Shortlists also appears to have had little influence on their 'sister' party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (the SDLP). The main encouragement at the institutional level in thinking about women's descriptive representation and political recruitment has largely come from the

short-lived Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (Cowell-Meyers, 2011; Fearon, 1999; Murtagh, 2008), and civil society organisations (the NGO Politics Plus fomented the creation of a cross-party women's caucus in 2016).[2] There has therefore been little explicit attention paid to the low levels of women's descriptive representation within the Northern Irish Assembly. Furthermore, at both the institutional and the party-political level, the relative absence of women has been given scant consideration, and no concrete measures have been brought in to tackle it.

Peace/political agreements since devolution

Partly due to the difficulty that there has been in fomenting a stable political situation in Northern Ireland, formal politics in the region have been much more disjointed than in the rest of the UK. The ongoing peace talks have been concerned with more than just the cessation of violence or efforts to extend justice to past victims and historical events – they have also been about establishing the rules for how democracy will work in the province. The multiple written agreements negotiated (mostly between political parties) since the Good Friday Agreement are thus useful to turn to in order to see what importance has been given to women and women's issues.

<Table 2 about here>

There has been little consistent or substantial reference to women in any of the negotiated agreements since the advent of devolution in the province. As shown in Table 2 the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement contains several references to women, although mostly set against the broader back-drop of human rights. There is, however, explicit reference to the 'right of women to full and equal political participation', which came about largely due to the concerted

efforts of the Women's Coalition, who formed around the time of the Agreement (Fearon, 1999; Murtagh, 2008; Pierson, 2017). Following the breakdown of the devolved institutions in 2004, the St. Andrew's Agreement of 2007 led to their re-establishment. Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party also entered into government together for the first time which paved the way for further powers around justice and policing to be devolved from Westminster. The Agreement contains no specific reference to women, girls or gender.

Entering the next decade, Northern Irish politics again entered a period of turmoil. The Haass-O'Sullivan talks[3] ran from July-December of 2013 in an attempt to reach agreement between political parties on contentious cultural issues such as flags, parading and dealing with the past. The talks largely failed to reach consensus on key issues. Part of the final proposals of the talks were that a Commission on Identity, Culture and Tradition would be established, which would address gender within a very wide remit which was also to include public holidays, symbols on national buildings, and a Bill of Rights. Indeed, when the Commission was established, it was chaired by two men and the 13 members included only one woman.[4] As table 2 shows, the resulting written agreement from the Haass-O'Sullivan talks contained a vague reference to gender, but none of the specific language seen in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

The failure of the Haass-O'Sullivan talks and the political crisis provoked in early 2014 by the revelation of the 'on-the-run' letters[5] lead to a further round of negotiations. These talks eventually produced the Stormont House Agreement of late 2014 which, acknowledging the absence of a Northern Irish Bill of Rights (promised in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, but still yet to come to fruition), called for 'the advancement of women in public life'. Further inter-party talks produced the document 'A Fresh Start' of the following year, which echoed the language of the Stormont House Agreement and called for the Executive to implement the 'development of a programme to increase the participation and influence of women in community development'.

Since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the inclusion of references to women in the developing peace agreements in Northern Ireland has therefore been both piecemeal and insubstantial. The specific political language of the original agreement has largely fallen by the wayside, with women now referred to in the vague terms of 'public life' and 'community development'. There has been no coherent attitude taken across the agreements regarding the political inclusion of women, or women's particular vantage points on either the past conflict or present Northern Irish society.

Across the Assembly and the ongoing political negotiations, women's involvement and issues are found wanting in Northern Ireland. Attempts to feminise formal politics in the Northern Irish context are an ongoing struggle. Women remain grossly underrepresented in political (and public) life and successive peace agreements have made little attempt to involve them as a specific group, or to apply a gendered lens to the Troubles. The political representation and inclusion of women has consistently not been considered as a central issue, and in the successive inter-party negotiations it has largely been left off the table for discussion or included in a very tokenistic and piecemeal fashion.

Politicising feminism

In line with the above, grassroots feminist activists' attempts to negotiate the political system in Northern Ireland face difficulties in working with a set of institutions which are male-dominated in both physical make-up and policy perspective. This section turns to consider how feminists in Northern Ireland have tried to work with formal politics to lobby for greater attentiveness to women's policy issues.

Feminist activism on abortion

Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the United Kingdom in several areas of gendered policy. Both childcare policy[6] and domestic violence policy[7] are less advanced than the rest of the United Kingdom. Yet perhaps the most obvious contemporary difference between the rest of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland is the absence of abortion legislation. The Abortion Act of 1967 which allows for legal termination of pregnancy was never extended to Northern Ireland (Thomson, 2016a, 2016b). As such, women seeking abortions (even for cases of rape and fatal foetal abnormality) are not entitled to them and must travel to England for the procedure. As of mid-2017 and a decision taken at Westminster, these procedures are now paid for by NHS England, but previously had to be paid for privately by the women themselves. Following the referendum to repeal the 8th amendment to the constitution in the Republic of Ireland in 2018, the issue has received much greater attention from the press and politicians alike. This has included calls for liberalisation by several Westminster government MPs[8] during the (ongoing) suspension of the Northern Irish Assembly, but there has yet to be any substantial legal reform.

Feminist activists and civil society bodies working on this issue have been repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to work with formal politics to enact change on abortion law. No political party calls for the extension of the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland, either in the Assembly or at Westminster.[9] There has been no change on abortion law since the Good Friday Agreement and, in fact, several attempts made to make access to the procedure even more difficult (Thomson, 2016b, 2018). Interviews conducted in 2014 with members of the NGO and activist community suggested that there was far higher support for liberalising change amongst MLAs in private, but that they did not feel able to voice this in public.[10] Formal politics appeared to offer little hope for change:

> We cannot get in, we have no voice up there ... We have exhausted the influence of the political end.[11]

> [re: working with MLAs at Stormont] I think you can only bang your head off the brick wall for so long.[12]

In light of this inability to work with formal politics, feminist activism has turned to extra-political vehicles as a means to further the case of abortion rights. In an example of the innovative style of activism adopted, on the anniversary of the opening of the Marie Stopes clinic in central Belfast in October 2013, pro-choice activists held a 'Happy Birthday Marie Stopes' party, with balloons and cake for passers-by outside the facility. In a similar spirit, in the run-up to the 2016 Assembly elections, the pro-choice group Alliance for Choice ran a postcard campaign. The group encouraged members of the public to send pre-printed postcards to their elected officials which bore the words 'trust women to make decisions for themselves' on the front. This has continued with a 2018 campaign named #pennypost, encouraging members of the public to write to Minister for Women and Equalities at Westminster to repeal parts of the legislation related to abortion, and to act for women from London whilst Stormont is suspended. It has been accompanied by a twitter hashtag and online campaigning. Building on this type of grassroots activism and the feeling that they have no space in formal political discussion, the focus of pro-choice activity has moved to address popular support and understanding of the issue. In the words of one activist, 'We looked at Stormont and thought the political campaigning, lobbying MLAs is going really nowhere. We need to start activating women from grassroots level so they can start lobbying their MLAs, especially when it comes to election time'.[13] Largely shut out of formal political discussion in Northern Ireland, pro-choice activism has responded by encouraging grassroots activism instead.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325

Despite the poor numbers of women in political life and the relative difficulties in getting formal politics to engage on women's issues, there is a wide-reaching and vibrant women's sector in Northern Ireland. Like many other post-conflict contexts, the women's sector in Northern Ireland has been reinvigorated with the advent of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security. UNSCR 1325 is a wide-reaching resolution enacted in 2000 which focuses on women's inclusion in peace processes and peacebuilding operations, and the protection of women and girls in conflict. The Women, Peace and Security agenda has been strengthened by a further 7 resolutions in this area. However, the UK does not classify Northern Ireland as a 'post-conflict' zone as 'the situation in Northern Ireland has never been considered an armed conflict, as defined in international law' (O'Rourke and McMinn, 2012, 32; see also Hoewer, 2013; Thomson, 2017). As such, Northern Ireland is not included in the UK's National Action Plan as part of its work under UNSCR 1325.

In spite of this, UNSCR 1325 has seen much uptake in Northern Ireland. It has been used by groups arguing for greater inclusion of a gendered perspective when dealing with the past, and to argue for mechanisms to include this within the bodies proposed in the Stormont House Agreement.[14] In 2014, a strategic guide and toolkit on UNSCR 1325 was developed for Northern Ireland, explaining its utility within the region. The toolkit is wide ranging and contains recommendations for the public sector about UNSCR 1325 which might be used to further women's voices within public life. A launch event for the guide in early 2014 brought together an impressive range of women's groups and NGOs from across Northern Ireland and cross-border communities. Yet, there was little presence from the formal political sphere or political parties.[15] When pointedly asked during a Q&A session about her party's commitment to including women's voices from the civil society sector, the only elected official present

appeared embarrassed and avoided the question. The moderator quickly moved the Q&A onto another topic. Similarly, there is an All-party Working Group (APG) on UNSCR 1325 in the Northern Irish Assembly, which enjoys membership from all of the main political parties. However, interviews suggested that meetings of this group were not well attended. Although a markedly less controversial issue than abortion, and with an APG supported by the major political parties, formal political movement around this mechanism for greater female inclusion in the ongoing peace process does not seem strong.

Attempts to politicise feminist activism in contemporary Northern Ireland – to use grassroots and civil society work as a means to lobby formal politics for the substantive representation of women – have thus struggled. Again, as with the difficulty of changing formal politics, we see a neglect of women's issues, which leads to an exclusion of their specific perspectives in the political realm. Feminist activists working outside the formal political structures have struggled to make the case to elected politicians that women's representation and issues are important, and that they merit attention.

Why have Northern Irish politics been so difficult to feminise?

Attempts to make formal politics more susceptible to a consideration of women's descriptive and substantive representation therefore appears difficult in contemporary Northern Ireland. The empirical data described above shows the relative neglect of the issue of women's representation in formal politics and the ongoing peace process, and the difficulty of liberal movement on women's policy issues. How can we explain this difficulty in addressing women in both formal politics and policy issues in Northern Ireland? We consider reasons for this difficulty here again through the lens of both feminising politics, and politicising feminist activism.

Feminising politics

As seen above, there has been great difficulty in making the formal political structures in Northern Ireland more cognisant of women's descriptive representation. This section considers the structural constraints which exist to discourage this.

Conscociational structures

As discussed previously, formal politics in Northern Ireland work along a very different basis from political structures in the rest of the United Kingdom. The consociational (power-sharing) framework works along four basic principles, which are centred around an understanding of the separate Nationalist and Unionist political communities: *Executive power-sharing (EPS)* (both communities share power within the overarching executive); *Autonomy or Self-government* (both communities have a level of self-protection within the institution with regards to proposed legislative changes); *Proportionality* (within political and public institutions) and *Veto-rights*. (Lijphart, 1977). Most especially in the system of veto rights (more specifically referred to as the Petition of Concern), the consociational framework in the Northern Irish Assembly places ethno-national identity at the heart of the institution. MLAs must designate as Nationalist, Unionist or Other upon being elected to the Assembly. A petition can be brought by thirty members of the Assembly. Cross-community voting rules are then brought into effect, meaning that a weighted majority of MLAs must vote in favour (an overall majority of MLAs must also support the vote, including a majority of both Nationalist and Unionist members present). MLAs who designate as 'Other' cannot file a petition meaning that they are 'less protected in the Assembly' (O'Leary, 2004, 271; see also McCulloch, 2017). In this way, ethnonational identity is institutionalised within formal politics, and forms the basic guiding force around which politics are organised.

In principle, this fact does not impede women from being encouraged to stand for office, or for feminist representatives working across party and ethnonational lines. Indeed, as Byrne and McCulloch acknowledge, both power-sharing and feminist support for increased women's representation are 'ultimately concerned with the democratic accommodation of difference' (2012, 566). Yet, as they go on to argue, this is 'not well integrated into either power-sharing theory or practice' (Ibid). In the consociational structures in Northern Ireland, ethno-national identity is clearly accommodated, but gender identity is not understood as a feature that the design of the institutions might need to address. As the above empirical evidence illustrated, there has been little attempt by either the Assembly or political parties to address the issue of women's underrepresentation. On the ground too, the consociational structures appear to impede any sense of community amongst women MLAs. The cross-party women's group recently established was only done so at the behest of an external NGO. That this change has emerged due to the work of exogenous forces suggests how difficult it is to work as women across party lines within the institution. One feminist activist also acknowledged the difficulties of trying to work with the consociational structures by relating it clearly to the centrality that ethno-national identity has in the Assembly: 'women's interests in general … have been ignored … it's more about this notion of achieving parity [between ethno-national communities]'[16] (see also Kennedy et al, 2016). When the primary political identity inscribed in the devolved institutions is ethnonational, any other understanding of difference takes second place. This has the unfortunate effect of rendering issues of women's political representation 'as an unnecessary deviation from the 'real' politics of the day' (Kennedy et al, 2016, 625).

Fluctuating nature of politics in the region

In addition to the consociational design of the formal political structures lies the fact that formal politics in the region has had a far rockier transition in the past twenty years than the other

devolved regions. As Table 2 above illustrates, the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was far from a conclusion to conflict or politics in Northern Ireland. The multiple agreements which have been negotiated in the two decades since are also reflected in a tumultuous politics. In the period from 1998-2002, the Assembly was suspended on three separate occasions. It was then suspended for the entirety of its second term, from 2002-2007. The Assembly of 2007 to 2011 was the first to complete a full term and marked a period of prolonged stability within the formal structures. This largely lasted until 2014, when revelations about the existence of a so-called 'On-the-Run' letter scheme came to light.

In 2016, whistle-blowing around the policy implementation of a renewable energy scheme in Northern Ireland threw politics once again into disarray. Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness declared no confidence in First Minister Arlene Foster and resigned prompting the dissolution of the Assembly in 2017. Elections in March 2017 saw the first time since Northern Ireland's creation in 1921 that Unionists did not win a majority of seats. An extended period was given for political parties to negotiate a coalition agreement and enter into the Executive, but this failed to produce any agreement. In the autumn of 2017, the UK Parliament passed the budget for Northern Ireland for 2017-2018, creating a de facto position of direct rule. At the time of writing in late 2018, the Assembly has yet to be reinstated and recently surpassed Belgium as the record holder for the longest period without a government.

Furthermore, since June 2017 the DUP have supplied the necessary votes required to prop up the Conservative government, throwing into question the potential that Westminster must be a neutral arbiter in Northern Irish politics (Tonge, 2017). The issue of the Irish border in the ongoing Brexit negotiations has also proven to be a key sticking point. Exactly what shape the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland will take following the UK's exit from the European Union is still to be agreed upon.

In light of this uncertainty, both in the politics of the region and vis-à-vis Brexit, there is little scope to inject a discussion around women and politics. Formal politics in Northern Ireland have, apart from the relatively stable period of 2007-2014, lurched from one crisis to the next. In this context, the main attitude from both regional and national government has largely been to keep 'the show on the road' and, as the On-the-Runs scandal illustrated, this has been made possible through initiatives which have often been semi-secretive and obscured from public debate. With the lack of a formal political situation, encouraging conversation around the relative absence of women in decision-making positions (most especially when, as seen in the above section on consociational structures and ethnonational identity, this is perceived to be outside the realm of 'normal' politics) is incredibly difficult. With no clear way forward for the Northern Irish Assembly at present, any structural approach to addressing the issue of women's descriptive representation appears unlikely to be forthcoming.

Politicising feminism

Whilst clear structural impediments exist to addressing women's political representation, barriers within the broader context of Northern Irish society are also important. We consider here the wider issues at stake in Northern Ireland in attempts to encourage movement around women's policy issues beyond the formal political structures.

Social conservatism

Northern Ireland is a socially conservative region, far more so than the rest of the United Kingdom, and this has a keen influence in politics and public life. Religion plays a key role both in terms of both individual identification and structural position. Only 16% of Northern Irish residents do not consider themselves to belong to a religion, and 53% attend a church service at least once a month.[17] Christianity, of various denominations, continues to dominate

the province, not only in the make-up of its citizenry,[18] but in the role that it plays structurally. Schools run by the Catholic Church serve the vast majority of the province's Catholic residents, with state schools tending to cater to the Protestant community.[19] Attitudes towards homosexuality are broadly conservative, although the younger generation would appear to be more liberal (Hayes and Mcallister, 2016).

As noted above, this social conservatism influences the type of public roles that women consider themselves suitable for (Matthews, 2016; Tonge et al, 2014). It further influences attitudes towards women when they do take on public roles. Following Arlene Foster's ascension to First Minister in 2016, her DUP colleague Edwin Poots MLA declared in the Assembly that becoming First Minister is the 'second most important job that she will ever take on' and that 'her most important job has been, and will remain, that of a wife, mother and daughter'.[20] Fidelma Ashe (2006a, 2006b, 2007) notes the way that public female figures in the immediate years following devolution, most notably the McCartney sisters and the mothers of children in the Holy Cross school dispute,[21] became symbolic of certain socially conservative ideals surrounding the family and motherhood.

The social conservatism of the region also influences the tone of debate around gendered policy issues. In Assembly debates on abortion, Biblical evocations are commonplace, in particular from DUP MLAs (Bloomer and Pierson, 2017; Thomson, 2015, 2017). Formal political debate on abortion often takes place through the lens of the 'right to life' of the foetus and the 'unborn child', rather than in an understanding of women's rights (Bloomer and Pierson, 2017). Equally, MLAs (again, predominantly from the DUP, who have blocked equal marriage legislation five times through the Assembly by employing the petition of concern – McCulloch 2017; Tonge, 2017) have been outspoken in their opposition to equal marriage, many on the basis of religious sentiment (Thomson, 2015). As the above discussion of abortion illustrates, this has led feminist activists to move beyond the Assembly, and to consider other mechanisms

for engagement and conversation around reproductive rights. Yet with this conservative discourse providing the backdrop to political discussion of many key gendered policy issues, the prospect of liberalisation emanating from within the Assembly itself appears slim.

Lack of a gendered perspective to the past

The ongoing political negotiations in Northern Ireland have become increasingly focused around issues of the past and how to deal with the legacy of the conflict, most especially from the Haass-O'Sullivan talks onwards. Yet the understanding of the past that has been forwarded in the proposed policies and bodies has largely been gender neutral and has not considered the specific roles played by women or harms done to them. In official documents (both the formal agreements outlined in Table 2 and the work of government sponsored bodies such as the Consultative Group on the Past (2009)) there has been very little attention given to women or gender. Furthermore, as Ahmed *et al* note of the Stormont House Agreement, not only is it 'silent on gender' but it also adopts 'apparently neutral principles and rules that in practice operate differently for women and men' (2016, 530). Dominant public thinking on the past not only excludes women but acts to reinforce a perspective which is ignorant of gendered difference.

This discrepancy has been acknowledged in academic scholarship (Ahmed et al, 2016; O'Rourke, 2012) and the work of non-governmental bodies (most notably the Legacy Gender Integration Group, 2015), but does not appear to have had any influence on the official responses to addressing the legacy of the Troubles. Such an oversight is worrying because, without an acknowledgement of women's particular vantage point, it is difficult to see how mechanisms or policies for dealing with the past can include them. As such, successive policies and politics will continue to work from a perspective which implicitly excludes women. The difficulties of mobilising around UNSCR 1325 as discussed above are clearly indicative of this.

Without a gendered appreciation of the past, civil society finds it hard to mobilise around women's issues in the present. Were a gendered perspective on the Troubles more dominant, persuading legislators of the value of this resolution (and, indeed, other policies) for Northern Ireland might be an easier task.

Conclusion

Twenty years after the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the promise inherent in it that women have the 'right to full and equal political participation' may be ~~in~~ true in fact but appears yet to become a reality. Clear strides have been made in terms of women's descriptive and substantive representation – the number of female MLAs is now the highest it has ever been, and there is a broad public conversation around issues such as abortion and same sex marriage. Yet there are still huge steps to be taken, both in encouraging women into public office and addressing key policy areas which affect them.

Encouraging both the feminisation of politics, and the politicisation of feminist activism in post-conflict Northern Ireland has had limited success. This article has taken stock of the contemporary picture for women and politics in the region, twenty years after the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. It has identified aspects of the consociational structures in the region as privileging ethno-national identity at the expense of other understandings of political difference, which inhibits women's representation. The absence of a gendered appreciation to an understanding of the past in Northern Ireland also works to exclude women's specific vantage points as a basis from which to create policy. Furthermore, Northern Irish society is broadly socially conservative, which can act to both inhibit women from considering public roles and create an illiberal discourse around certain issues (most especially abortion and LGBT rights). The reasons for the generally unfeminised nature of politics in Northern Ireland are

therefore various, multi-faceted and ingrained within both political and societal structures. Change will not come easily.

In the contemporary setting however, most centrally, movement on any of the above issues will most likely only come when the politics of the region are more settled. With the Assembly still suspended as of late 2018, and the issue of the Irish border looming over Brexit negotiations, Northern Irish politics are experiencing their most complicated period in years. Injecting a conversation about women's rights and political presence into the current situation will remain difficult.

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[1] A description of Northern Ireland during the Troubles attributed to Cathy Harkin, Derry Women's Aid. Quoted in Fearon, 1999, p.106.

[2] http://politicsplus.com/news-item/northern-ireland-womens-caucus/. Accessed 15/11/17.

[3] The talks were colloquially referred to as the Haass-O'Sullivan talks as they were led by Richard Haass, former United States Special Envoy for Northern Ireland, and Meghan O'Sullivan, former US Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan. The talks were formally referred to as the Panel of the Parties of the Northern Ireland Executive.

[4] https://www.fictcommission.org/en/commission. Accessed 08/01/18.

[5] In 2014, revelations about the existence of a so-called 'On-the-Run' letter scheme which appeared to provide assurance to persons suspected of paramilitary activity that they would not be convicted came to light. The DUP claimed to have no knowledge of such a scheme and then First Minister Peter Robinson threatened to resign.

[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-33729595, Accessed 27/11/17.

[7] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/37643205.. Accessed 27/11/17.

[8] Such as current Secretary of State for International Development and Minister for Women and Equalities, Penny Mordaunt. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/05/northern-ireland-secretary-gives-backing-to-abortion-reform. Access 06/09/18.

[9] The Labour party's manifesto in 2017 did promise however, that it would "work with the Assembly to extend [the 1967 Act] to women in Northern Ireland." Also, as of 2018, Sinn Féin have supported liberalisation for abortion within a "limited gestational period" (assumed to be twelve weeks, which is the period that forthcoming legislation from the Irish Daíl is expected to provide for), which reflects their support for a Yes vote to repeal the 8th amendment in the Irish referendum. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44507054. Accessed 06/09/18.

[10] This section draws on over 50 interviews conducted with MLAs, health professionals and civil society members in Northern Ireland and England in the first half of 2014.

[11] Private interview with the author, Belfast, March 2014.

[12] Private interview with the author, Belfast, March 2014.

[13] Private interview with the author, Belfast, March 2014.

[14] Relatives for Justice, "Dealing with the Past in Ireland: Where are the Women? Women's experiences of conflict and need for implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325", February 2015, available at http://bit.ly/1CYmzZD. Accessed 22/11/17.

[15] The author was present at this event and was shown a list of organisations present. The Progressive Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party were the only political parties in attendance.

[16] Private interview with the author, Belfast, February 2014.

[17] Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2015. http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2015/Background/RELIGION.html and http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2015/Background/CHATTND2.html. Accessed 25/11/16.

[18] The NILT of 2015 records only 1% of NI citizens belonging to a religion other than a Christian denomination. http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2015/Background/RELIGION.html. Accessed 25/11/16.

[19] 2015 NILT data shows that only 15% of respondents attended an 'integrated' school. http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2015/Background/SLFMXSCH.html. Accessed 25/11/16.

[20] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-politics-35290537. Accessed 05/01/16.

[21] The Holy Cross school dispute in 2001 and 2002 centred around a Catholic girls' school in North Belfast which exists in a largely Protestant area. Protests met students and parents walking to school and for a period they were escorted by riot police and soldiers. Robert McCartney was murdered, allegedly by Provisional Irish Republican Army members, in a bar in 2005. His sisters and fiancée were vocal in their calls for justice and identifying the murderers, meeting with both then Prime Minister Tony Blair and then U.S. President George W. Bush.